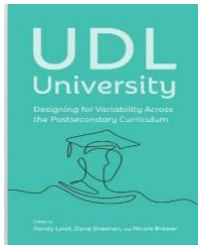

Book Review

UDL University: Designing for Variability Across the Postsecondary Curriculum

Edited by Rachel Laist, Dan Sheehan, and Nicole Brewer

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ABSTRACT

In post-secondary learning environments, classrooms are characterized by learner variability and diverse cultural backgrounds. In *UDL University: Designing for Variability Across the Postsecondary Curriculum* by Randy Laist, Dana Sheehan, and Nicole Brewer, the authors offer their own professional stories about how they implemented Universal Design for Learning into their multidisciplinary courses at Goodwin University in Hartford, Connecticut. The authors provide a practical handbook for educators and curriculum designers in post-secondary education that encapsulates accessibility and representation in actionable student-centered classrooms. The strengths of the text are presented through first-person qualitative case studies in the fields of science, communication, composition, and career services. This review also criticizes the book for its heavy reliance on qualitative over quantitative research. This text is a pragmatic resource for agents of change in higher education who are committed to fostering inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: universal design for learning, post-secondary curriculum, learner-centered pedagogy

CAST (2024), the developers of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), states that students acquire agency and autonomy in their learning when there are multiple ways to engage, represent, and actively express themselves. Today, learner agency has increasingly become one of the most discussed topics in

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education. In *UDL University: Designing for Variability Across the Postsecondary Curriculum* by Randy Laist, Dana Sheehan, and Nicole Brewer, the authors offer their own professional stories about how they implemented UDL into their multidisciplinary courses at Goodwin University in Hartford, Connecticut. The authors are seasoned educators who promote implementing UDL in postsecondary curriculum. Laist, Sheehan, and Brewer all have extensive experience using UDL in their own courses, and as such, they facilitate professional development workshops at Goodwin University. As educators and administrators, they focus on providing other institutions with the tools they need to implement UDL into their curriculum, to provide more learner-centered pedagogy and identification of learning barriers. They model the theoretical framework for UDL and provide practical ways for using it in various contexts. Adding to the literature produced by CAST and Novak and Rodriguez, the authors advance the conversation in UDL scholarship in a post-secondary setting by providing discipline-specific applications. This book is an enlightening, instructional guide, intended for educators and other agents of change.

UDL University: Designing for Variability Across the Postsecondary Curriculum is organized according to four categories: Sciences, Humanities, Composition, and Careers. Each category consists of several chapters. For instance, in the Careers section, the authors present stories from Manufacturing, Early Childhood Education, Organizational Leadership, and Graduate Education professors. Each chapter is dedicated to one practitioner's experience with UDL supported by personal narrative and biographical information. The authors present their own stories in addition to 13 other educators whose disciplines varied. The contributors offer ways to remove learning barriers and provide alternative approaches to developing curriculum.

The central claim of this book is that educators are ready to set aside the old lecture-based, teacher-centered curriculum for one that is more learner-centered, equitable, and accessible. This book calls on academics to implement UDL workshops and professional development into their curriculum to improve teaching, student learning, and retention. According to Novak and Rodriguez (2016), UDL provides a framework that ensures multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression. Some UDL strategies include multimodal engagement, flexibility with deadlines, inclusive learning environments, scaffolding assignments, and promoting peer collaboration. The authors significantly contribute to the existing body of literature by trading theoretical principles for practical applications, while emphasizing learner variability and inclusive course design. For example, in the journal article *Scaffolding Trust to Advance Inclusive Teaching through UDL: A Model for Academic Development* Clarke et al. advance their argument of using UDL by referencing the work of Laist, Sheehan, and Brewer. Clarke et al. (2025) states that the widespread use of UDL by various disciplines indicates a shift in faculty mindsets from traditional to learner-centered.

This text currently appears as a professional resource for teacher education, faculty development, and academic bibliographies. Institutions such as Eastern Connecticut State University (n.d.) and their Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment support their faculty and staff in their efforts to create inclusive and equitable classrooms by using *UDL University: Designing for Variability Across the Postsecondary Curriculum* as a “teaching resource related to diversity, equity, justice, inclusion, and belonging” (para. 4). Additionally, the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut implements UDL using the text as a framework for creating classrooms that support all students all the time. “In November 2022, University of Bridgeport graduated its first cohort of UDL Teaching Fellows, with the goal of bringing a more student-centered approach to UB classrooms” (University of Bridgeport, 2023, para. 1). Ultimately, the text has established itself as a cornerstone to strengthen institutional expertise in Universal Design at colleges and universities at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The authors present a convincing claim that UDL improves student learning opportunities for all. They challenge the traditional theoretical framework, advocating for a learner-centered curriculum that is accessible and equitable by consistently demonstrating that UDL is applicable to various disciplines. They provide anecdotal information along with an anthology of their colleagues' experiences regarding the use of UDL across disciplines. Additionally, the authors use reliable source material by experts in the field to substantiate their claims that using UDL supports the whole student (Laist et al., 2022). For example, in the Composition section the authors demonstrate how they use UDL to break down paragraphs, minimize

threats during peer review, give students more autonomy during their research, and create more learner-centered online environments. Chapter 9 on peer review is particularly interesting as one of the contributors, Cynthia J. Murphy, explores minimizing distractions. She discusses a priori knowledge about peer review with her students and provides several models. She conducts a sample peer review session in groups and explains three types of feedback: destructive, constructive, and instructive. Murphy points out that the class will focus on instructive feedback and provides a formula on how to do so: praise + detect + suggest (PDS) (Laist et al., 2022). This formula begins with a praiseful comment, followed by identifying an area in need of improvement, and ending with a suggestion on how to revise their papers. Since students in Composition courses are from various majors and disciplines and have different levels of confidence, this approach helps to lower the affective filter that students typically have in writing courses. Although this method is appealing and has been proven to work in her classroom, the chapter would have been more impactful if the contributor provided data about student outcomes instead of simply narrative. Solid information regarding a sense of belonging, higher order cognitive skills, confidence, DFW rates, and retention would support the valuable contribution of implementing UDL into Composition. The contributor provides plenty of sensory details so the reader can get a sense of her methodology, but the chapter would have a more solid foundation if quantitative data were offered as well.

Similarly, the Sciences section of the book outlines how UDL can be used in content-heavy or large enrollment STEM courses such as Histology, Sociology, Computer Applications, and Nursing. Through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression, Laist, Sheehan, and Brewer demonstrate that UDL can work in STEM courses as well as Humanities. The authors reinforce that learner variability exists across disciplines, but through inclusive course and classroom design, the barriers to learning can be significantly decreased. Kelli Goodkowsky, the contributor for Chapter 1, approached UDL by examining the various barriers to learning her Histology students encountered. According to Goodkowsky, her challenge was “connecting with my students [and]sharing real world histology experience” (Laist et al., 2022, p. 11). To make that connection with her students happen, Goodkowsky decided to employ a colloquium style seminar at the end of each class session. Fortunately, the classroom was not the traditional sterile, mechanical environment that one expects to see in a laboratory setting. The university had funded a makeover to replace conventional classroom furniture, with a more relaxed space, using “cafe-vibe” furniture (Laist et al., 2022, p. 11). The flexibility of the seating arrangements brought down the level of trepidation, which in turn fueled classroom discussions about the content that was being delivered. During discussions, the students identified where they understood the material, where they still needed more support and clarification, and how they could balance their scholastic responsibilities with real-life as they moved through the program (Laist et al., 2022). Overall, the design of the room did foster a sense of community and belonging in Professor Goodkowsky’s class, but a drawback to this approach is that not every institution has the funding to sustain this method.

However, to support their claim further, the authors could have included more information about the time commitment involved in the restructuring of the curriculum. They agree that restructuring curriculum is a lengthy process and is collaborative in nature, but declaring the actual time commitment, or at least an estimate or an example from their own timelines would provide the audience with more confidence in this framework. The audience, educators and/or administrators, have hectic schedules; therefore, planning is integral to a successful semester. The fear of the unknown may make some question whether the benefits of UDL outweigh the time commitment. Additionally, although the authors rely on credible sources to support their claims, the bulk of their argument is supported by qualitative artifacts such as narrative and the experiences of the practitioners. This may serve as a limitation to demonstrate measurable outcomes such as retention, belonging, confidence, or academic performance for those who rely more heavily on quantitative data.

The book itself is aesthetically pleasing, showcasing a minimalist’s use of graphics, font, and color. The language was accessible and clear, and the tone was welcoming. The authors clearly project a sense of excitement for the use of UDL in their respective courses. The voice is conversational, while at the same time academic, creating a sense of pathos and ethos for the audience. Laist, Sheehan, and Brewer organize the book into categories and then into chapters within those categories, which makes the book easy to

navigate. The book is intended for educators and administrators who are interested in a learner-centered, inclusive teaching environment.

The authors accomplish their goal of making UDL relatable and attainable. They provide their own personal journeys and experiences with integrating UDL into their interdisciplinary courses. The authors relied on qualitative data such as case studies and real-world anecdotal examples. This data helped to build a relationship with the audience. It is likely that this book will be well-received by educators and by agents for change in higher education. For instance, the University of Nebraska, Kearney, incorporates this text to reduce barriers to learning and to provide a full range of learner variability. Educator Liz Bloomfield states, “I’ve been using UDL for 3 years now and ... I really have found that the students are more engaged, excited to share what they’ve learned” (University of Nebraska, n.d.). The authors offer actionable guidelines for creating curriculum that includes active engagement, representation, and action and expression across disciplines through practical strategies, examples, and reflective practices.

Biographical sketch

My name is *Barbara (nee Compagnucci) Wright*. I am an Instructor III at Florida Gulf Coast University in the Department of Language and Literature in the United States. I have an M.A. in Literature and an M.Ed. in Teaching English as a Second Language. My primary research is on the use of Universal Design for Learning as a framework for student engagement, representation, and action, while incorporating Learning Assistants in non-STEM courses such as Composition I and II as a tool to support student success. My research also includes how Learning Assistants are affected by their near-peer position as social architects and cognitive coaches. Another area of focus is exploring the “why” and “how” learning takes place in the second language classroom through Conversation Analysis.

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